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ABSTRACT

The social competence of 68 preschool children, including special education, at-risk, and control Ss, was examined to determine whether at-risk Ss would differ from comparison children in social skills and acceptance by peers. Teacher ratings of social skills were reported on the California Preschool Social Competency Scale while peer and self-ratings of social acceptance were measured on an adapted picture sociometric technique. Results revealed that teachers' ratings of social skills were significantly different across groups. Ss at risk in the mainstream were judged significantly more competent socially than Ss in special education, but significantly less capable than control Ss. Peers viewed children in much the same way as teachers, and self-ratings of preschoolers were not significantly correlated with either social skills or social acceptance by the peer group. Findings supported the need for early recognition of social problems and subsequent training prior to elementary school. Intervention strategies are briefly reviewed. (CL)

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SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN EDUCATIONALLY AT-RISK PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

The social interactions of preschool children have been the subject of observational study, if not systematic research, for more than fifty years. The notion that social interaction is an emerging activity, paralleling cognitive and sensory development is not new. From those early studies, we learned that

1. as children mature, they interact with peers with greater frequency and their relationships become more stable;

2. children's developing language increases the complexity of play and strengthens social bonds; and

3. children's early social behaviors form the basis of their peer relationships later on, and have lasting effects on personality development.

Conversely, the failure of a young child to engage in activities of the peer group has been found to be among the most sensitive indications of a problem upon entering school. (Hartup, 1977) There is also evidence that unremediated social problems in the early years are stable over time and not subject to spontaneous recovery or an easy cure. (Gottman, et al., 1975)

In the past decade, the issue of early identification of children "at-risk", or educationally handicapped, has gained attention. The emphasis, as indicated by the screening and diagnostic instruments currently in use, has been and still is,

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largely on cognitive, sensory, and motor skills. Only recently have studies undertaken to explore the social competence and interpersonal relationships of this population. Social competence, as used here, refers to the ability of the child to act appropriately and relate to others. As such, it includes both the possession of social skills and performance.

It is well recognized today that many school age children with learning disabilities not only suffer from academic failure, but may carry the additional burden of social failure as well. (Bryan, 1976; Kronick, 1981) They tend to have inadequately developed social skills and experience rejection by peers and teachers. Until recently, it has been assumed that their social problems are a secondary effect of the years of frustration and failure incurred in school.

For many youngsters, though, the lack of social competence is an intrinsic part of the educational handicap itself, developing from constitutional as well as environmental factors. The characteristics most often associated with learning disabilities interfere with their social relationships as well as their academic performance. A child with a short attention span, for example, will find it as difficult to stick with a game as to complete a math test. And, if he has language problems, he will be unable to communicate in social situations as well as in an oral science report. Youngsters who misperceive words on a page and interpret 43 as 84, are just as likely to "misread" non-verbal communication, i.e. body language and facial

expressions that most children understand easily. Memory deficits, distractibility, and perseveration also have implications for the playground as well as the classroom.

To study children before they experience academic failure in school, I investigated the social competence of preschool children at-risk. The purpose of the study was to explore whether that population would differ from comparison children in social skills and acceptance by peers. Sixty-eight children, with a mean age of 4.2 years, were divided into three groups -- those in special education classes, children at-risk in the mainstream, and controls. The groups were balanced for age, sex, and SES. Teacher ratings of social skills were reported on the California Preschool Social Competency Scale (Levine, et al., 1969), while peer and self ratings of social acceptance were measured on an adapted picture sociometric technique (a combination of peer nomination and rating scale).

Results of the study indicated that teachers' ratings of social skills were significantly different across groups. Youngsters at-risk in the mainstream were judged to be significantly more competent socially than children in special education, but significantly less capable than controls. Children rated their classmates in much the same direction as teachers, although they were more accepting of children's handicapping conditions than they probably would become in elementary school where the social hierarchy is more established. Self evaluation of social acceptance was not positively correlated with either peer or teacher ratings.

In summary, teachers of preschool children were found to be reliable judges of preschool children's social behaviors; peers viewed children in much the same way as teachers, and self-ratings of preschool children were not significantly correlated with either social skills or social acceptance by the peer group.

The results suggest the following:

1. Social skills are positively associated with educational handicap even in the preschool years and, therefore, may be considered an intrinsic part of the learning disability rather than the result of academic failure.

2. Preschool children may be selected for special education on the basis of social competence even more than developmental level.

3. The findings support a model for early recognition of social problems and subsequent training before children enter elementary school. There is sufficient evidence that interventions in young children's peer relations can effectively alter the course of their behavioral development and subsequent peer acceptance.

This is particularly relevant today with the current trend toward mainstreaming. There are indications that many mainstreamed youngsters suffer more from their social deficits and isolation from peers than from their academic failure. (Strain, 1982) It would seem appropriate, then, that interventions and remedial efforts be initiated as early as possible to facilitate the success of mainstreaming efforts.

Several intervention strategies have been shown to be effective in preschool programs. Puppetry, role playing, discussion, prompting by teachers, and peer modeling are a few of those used effectively. If children can develop a repertoire of social skills providing them with alternate methods to maladaptive behaviors, they are less likely to resort to negative ones.

In the classroom teachers can

- discuss the effects of a child's acts, giving immediate feedback
- suggest ways for children to be helpful and cooperative
- set up situations where children are likely to help each other
- reward the victim of aggression with attention, ignoring the aggressor. Retaliation in kind only exacerbates aggressive behavior.
- role-play alternative solutions to a conflict
- use peers as role models and agents of change
- encourage activities and toys that require interaction
- request that non-handicapped children interact with children at-risk. They will, but only when expected and encouraged to do so.

To learn positive social behavior, children need to understand the needs of others and develop the skills to know how to respond appropriately. Although most children acquire social competence through daily living, children at-risk may need to

be taught how to live effectively with others in their environment. Early childhood centers can and should stress more than cognitive development. They can foster a supportive environment in which children are encouraged to develop and practice social skills.

If, as parents and educators, we encourage cooperative efforts, teach problem solving, and provide opportunities for constructive behavior, we will truly be giving children at-risk a headstart -- in learning and living.

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